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IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 205

March 22, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Senator Jent, &
Members of the Committee:

I support Senate Bill 205, exempting game warden positions from the vacancy savings mandate. Vacancy savings is meant to save money in the general fund. Game wardens are not paid with general fund dollars.

I live in a county which lost its game warden the end of summer. Our county is approximately the size of the state of Rhode Island. Our four big game hunting districts, Canyon Ferry Lake, the Missouri River and its mountain tributaries, and our broad agricultural valleys comprise some of the most heavily hunted, fished, and boated area in Montana. Five other warden positions in the state were vacant during this past hunting season. Citizens can report suspicious activity to TIP MONT for followup by a warden on call, usually from the nearest regional office. While on-call wardens are responding to far flung calls from outlying districts, they are missing important calls in their own territory. A warden who answered a call to our neighborhood commented that he missed over a dozen other calls while travelling to and investigating this one complaint.

Poachers and chronic private property violators have free rein to do their thing under these circumstances. The odds of their being caught in action by a warden are slim to none. The average citizen who might get a little carried away the in excitement of the chase is more likely to bend or forget the rules when he knows he won't be seen or caught by a warden. The people most likely to witness or discover unlawful activity; ordinary hunters, landowners, guides, or outfitters, have no training in investigating or apprehending poachers. The best they can do is call TIP MONT with a license plate number. Often the trail has gone cold or the evidence has disappeared by the time a followup investigation can take place.

Montanans are serious about respecting and protecting our wildlife and our outdoor heritage. Compared to the national average, and to the individual averages of other states, we rank at the top for the proportion of citizens who participate in bird watching, wildlife watching, hunting, and fishing. Adequate fish and wildlife law enforcement is essential to preserving these important aspects of our culture and heritage.

Senate Bill 205 addresses this need. I thank you for your affirmative vote.